



**CA Emergency
Management Agency
Fire and Rescue**



**California Fire
Chiefs Association**



**California
Professional
Firefighters**

April 8, 2009

TO: **ALL INTERESTED PARTIES**
FROM: **Kim Zagaris**, Cal EMA Fire and Rescue Chief
Sheldon Gilbert, President, California Fire Chiefs Assn.
Lou Paulson, President, California Professional Firefighters
RE: **CA FIRE SERVICE POLICY STATEMENT ON PACK TEST**

From time to time questions arise concerning the "Pack Test" for physical readiness of firefighters; there is confusion on the purpose of the test, the need for the test and the effectiveness of the test. We are issuing this letter in the hopes of clarifying the issues that surround the test which include labor-management relations and the affect on the statewide Mutual Aid system.

The *National Interagency Incident Management System Wildland Fire Qualification System Guide, PMS 310-1* (310-1) establishes the minimum requirement for physical fitness levels for wildland firefighting positions for the National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG). The NWCG uses the "Pack Test" to demonstrate this level of work capacity.

The Pack Test is not intended to be a standard that demonstrates that an incumbent firefighter is "fit for duty". Rather, the Pack Test is used by federal agencies to evaluate the fitness of an individual who is a candidate to be considered for employment specifically for wildland firefighting. *The Pack Test is a measure of an individual's "work capacity", not their ability to do his or her job successfully.*

The Pack Test is a "functional capacity evaluation". It falls short of the NFPA firefighter fitness standards (1021, 1051, 1582 and 1583) and The Fire Service Joint Labor Management Wellness-Fitness Initiative (WFI) in determining firefighter fitness for duty and ability to complete the job successfully.

In 310-1, regarding qualifications, it states, "The NWCG recognizes the ability of cooperating agencies at the local level to jointly define and accept each other's qualifications for initial attack, extended attack, large fire operations and prescribed fire."

Fire departments impose a false sense of security that is tied to the Pack Test as an indicator of fitness for duty. In some cases, fire chiefs have determined that the Pack Test is a requirement for certification under the California Incident Command Certification System (CICCS). The Pack Test is not a determination of fitness for duty and, physical fitness is not part of CICCS criteria.

Under NWCG policy and CICCS procedure, it is the fire chief that makes the decision on the fitness of the firefighters in his or her department. The use of the Pack Test for this purpose amounts to an incumbent performance issue. This begs the question, what constitutes incumbent firefighter fitness for duty?

The big issue regarding the Pack Test or other "fit for duty" physical evaluation is what to do for the firefighters who do not "pass" the test. The International Association of Firefighters and International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFF/IAFC) WFI Task Force maintains the position that "the failure of an incumbent firefighter demonstrates the fire department's (including labor, management and the individual) inability to prepare and/or maintain training skill and conditioning to perform the job specific functions required for fire department operations."

There are no consensus standards or validated performance standards that have been developed for incumbent firefighters. In this case, physical fitness is a better predictor of successful job completion rather than physical performance. A performance test without an accompanying fitness program is worthless.

Performance tests, including the Pack Test, have an acceptable (pass) time for completion of a task. The assumption in establishing pass/fail based on performance is that a shorter time to completion demonstrates successful job completion. However, speed is not a predictor of success; a task performed too fast may cause injuries.

Fire chiefs can establish performance tests. Imposing the standard will alter working conditions. After the standards are set, the effect of the standards on working conditions may have to be negotiated with the labor groups. What will be done with those firefighters who fail to meet the standards? Again, a performance test without an accompanying fitness program is worthless.

Rather than an arbitrary demonstration of work capacity, fire departments should follow nationally established standards that have been endorsed by the international parent organizations for both management and labor.

The implementation of the Pack Test will also create a patchwork of requirements that could affect the statewide mutual aid system. If some departments require the Pack Test before they respond in mutual aid situations, this will create an artificial barrier that could delay or even preclude departments from responding. Additionally if certain departments are requiring the Pack Test for their personnel are they going to require automatic or mutual aid resources to also have the Pack Test completed before responding to fire events in their jurisdiction? These questions and others need to be addressed as quickly as practical as to not disrupt the current response system,

The California fire service must implement and maintain a physical fitness standard that is driven by *verifiable* medical criteria and a process that evaluates each firefighter based on their expected job performance. The firefighter fitness programs should be positive in approach and not punitive.

The WFI is a complete medical, physical fitness and wellness program package. It is fully developed and continually evaluated for effectiveness in maintaining firefighters' physical and mental capabilities. These recommendations are referenced in NFPA standards 1021, 1582 and 1583.

The IAFF, through formal policy, recommends that physical fitness programs emphasize the general health benefits to the firefighter as well as benefits to the fire department.

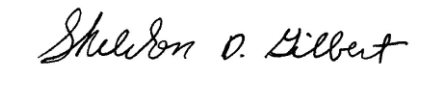
The IAFC endorses the Wellness-Fitness Initiative with these specific goals:

- *Overcome the historic fire service punitive mentality of physical fitness and wellness issues;*
- *Move beyond negative timed, task-based performance testing to progressive wellness improvement;*
- *Require a commitment by labor and management to a positive individualized fitness/wellness program; and*
- *Develop a holistic wellness approach that includes: medical, fitness, injury/fitness/medical rehabilitation and behavioral health.*

The California fire service will do well to adopt the same goals regarding firefighter fitness. This will provide a measureable and verifiable fitness standard for all firefighters for their local jurisdiction as well as responding to statewide mutual aid needs.

To implement non-specific work capacity tests, such as the Pack Test, circumvents a legitimate physical fitness program from which the fire department will maximize the safety of the firefighters.


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